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THE GUARDIAN SHORT STORY

WITHOUT ANTECEDENTS
By OTHO B. SENGU
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They sat on the ground like children at a picnic, watching the clouds drifting and changing above them.

"It's like a picture gallery," said Miss Fairlie softly.
"So it is," assented the young ranchman heartily. "Let's choose pictures, as the children do. See, there's a beautiful maiden robed in white. She's mine."
"Very well. You saw her first. Look, there's a house. That's mine."
"It's a ranch house, then," decidedly.
"See how low and spread out it is; plenty of land, you see."
"It's all full of nooks and corners," dreamily, "and there are broad piazzas with vines growing all over them."
"Of course," with prompt assent, "that's the ideal house for a ranch. Look there, Miss Fairlie! See what is coming up to your piazza," as a smaller cloud rolled up tumultuously.

"That's a horse and rider, Mr. Roberts," excitedly.
"Sure, it is you, just starting out for a ride over your ranch! See the veil on your hat!"
She laughed with almost childish enjoyment of the child's play at "make believe."
"There's another rider now. Let's see who that is."
They gazed earnestly at the passing cloud.

"I thought so," cried the man triumphantly, "it's me," with a dashing disregard of grammar, "it's me—on Sanchez. We're going together over our ranch."
The woman's hand reached out instinctively as if to brush the clouds away, and the hand was promptly caught and held in a larger, stronger one.

"Let's make it true," he whispered earnestly. "Don't go back east again. Stay here and make it true."
She shook her head half sadly.
"You don't like it here. You couldn't make the sacrifice."
"It isn't that. I do like it. I like everything about it. I never felt so near the sky before—never before so realized the warmth and comfort of the earth. To me the breadth of vision is fascinating. But my work lies elsewhere."

"What work?" gravely.
"Why, my work—my business—my life work."
"I suppose you mean your writing—your editorial work?"
"Certainly. I have no other."
"That is what you are doing for a livelihood, because you are brainy enough to be successful at it. But is that really your life work—the work to satisfy a woman's heart and bring rest and peace into her life? Look, dearest, that pretty knoll over there is just the place to build the rambling stone house, with nooks and corners and vines and piazzas. The land is mine as far as you can see on each side. You may have a dozen houses if you like."

"I should know you are Irish," with defensive evasion. "Such impetuosity!"
"My mother was Scotch," smiling winningly, "and you know pertinacity is a predominant characteristic of the Scotch people. Combine that with my Irish impetuosity."
"It's a formidable combination," with a movement to arise.

"We're not going yet," putting out a detaining hand, "we're going to watch the sunset and talk about our house and plan about our wedding. I don't need to tell you that I love you, dear."
"But—but, you've known me only a month!"
"That's long enough to know that I love you."
"And I know nothing of your—your antecedents," hesitatingly.

"I haven't any," shortly.
"In New England," slowly, "one's antecedents count for a good deal."
The man laughed bitterly and then his face grew grave.

"Please sit down again, Miss Fairlie. I foresee a conflict between your eastern pride and prejudice and my western independence and intolerance, and I am not equal to it standing."
She yielded, not unwillingly.
"A man without antecedents"—she began.

"In this section of God's country," he interrupted firmly, "a man stands for just what he is. No one cares who his relatives are if he is 'square and white' and does the right thing here. Never mind my 'antecedents,' Agnes. Don't you love me?"
He put out his hand and softly touched a fold of her riding habit. She trembled at the suggestion of a caress in the tender touch.

"I wish you'd go away," she pleaded.
"Won't you go away while I think it all out?"
The odd, boyish abruptness that had so often amused her came back again.
"Go away? Not much! I'll stay right here. I may be of great assistance to you in making up your mind."
She sat in troubled silence.

Presently he began speaking again, low and tenderly. "You have not said that you love me, Agnes, but I believe that you do."
"I—I am afraid that I do," with something very like a sob in her voice.
"I have often wondered how it would seem—to care so much for some one as to wish to be with him always. Now I know!"
He controlled the wild impulses of his impetuous heart and only said

gently, "I believe I can make you happy."
"There are some things," she interrupted, speaking slowly and with a painful effort, "that it is only right you should know. I—I think I am older than you."
"Yes," he assented calmly, "I knew that."
"You"—after a pause—"you are not more than thirty-five?" questioningly.
"I'm awfully sorry, dear, but you've got to cut off ten years. I'll be twenty-five next Thursday."
She gasped, recoiling as from a dash of cold water, and covered her face with slender, trembling hands.
"It's a shame, isn't it, sweetheart?" coaxingly. "But don't you mind. We don't need to hang our family record on the outside of the house, and my gray hair is so deceiving no one will suspect. Let's talk about the wedding."
"—If it could be this week?"
"—This week!" in startled consternation. "Who ever heard of such a thing?"

"When a man has lived a whole quarter of a century don't you think he ought to have a birthday gift—the one he wants? I want you, Agnes. We can be married then—there is no need of waiting—and we'll just run over to Frisco and take a trip somewhere—across the ocean perhaps," watching the averted face closely—"perhaps to Sydney to see Jack."

With a sharp cry of pain she turned a white, frightened face to his.
"Jack! What do you know of Jack?"
"Only good, dear one," soothingly. "Your brother is well and doing finely in his profession."
"Do you know—all about Jack?" she whispered.
"Everything."
She was crying softly.

He put his arms about her and drew her to him with tender, comforting words.
"Look at me, sweetheart. Don't you know who I am? Think of that last day you saw Jack?"
She gazed long and earnestly into his face.

"Not Robert Boyle!" she cried at last.
"Robert MacNeal Boyle," he answered slowly, with a certain pride of ancestry in his voice. "My father never forgave me, and so when I came west I reversed my name and am known here as MacNeal Roberts. Good old Converse and Eleanor are the only ones who know the truth. I think I loved you from that day when you came to see Jack; you were so brave and true. When Dick Converse brought his Boston bride home and I learned she was your friend, I asked her to prevail upon you to visit her. I meant to win you if I could."
She touched his face softly with her finger tips.

"And you—you served?"
"I served a year in prison," firmly; "hence the white locks, sweetheart."
"A year that belonged to Jack"—she sobbed.

"There was no other way," he argued earnestly. "Jack wouldn't have lived a month shut up there in prison. It was only a bit of boyish bravado anyway, but the authorities were determined to make an example of some college fellow. Jack's sudden sickness gave me the chance to clear him and to help those stupid detectives prove it against me. They knew it was one of us. I've never regretted it, but that is why I have no 'antecedents,' Agnes."
She put her arms about his neck and held her face against his. "You don't need antecedents, dear. I love you for what you are yourself!"

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